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SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

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November 18, 2005

The Honorable Steve Buyer
Chairman
House Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Buyer:

With the recent celebration of Veterans Day, Americans are reminded again of the service and sacrifice so ably shouldered by our nation's veterans. As the Representatives serving Northern Indiana veterans, we ask for your assistance in expanding health care opportunities available to the veterans' community. Our strategy is twofold: creating a new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Elkhart County and opening enrollment for the South Bend CBOC. Both options will facilitate a more adequate and timely level of care for veterans in Northern Indiana.

The CARES Commission report of February 2004 recognized the shortcomings of health care options available to veterans in Northern Indiana. The report indicated that at 63 percent, Indiana falls below the 70 percent standard for providing access to primary care within 30 minutes of veterans' homes. By FY2012, the CARES model projects that the primary care workload will increase significantly in Indiana by 58 percent over the FY2001 baseline. More recent estimates bolster these figures, showing clinic projections increasing in the coming years. The proposed closing of inpatient facilities at the Fort Wayne VAMC under the CARES decision will only exacerbate the problem. According to the Commission's findings, it recommended the creation of two CBOCs in Northern Indiana to augment the proposed closing of the inpatient services at Fort Wayne. One of the proposed sites was Elkhart County. Yet the Secretary's final decision on the CARES Commission report did not include Elkhart on the list of CBOCs for priority implementation.

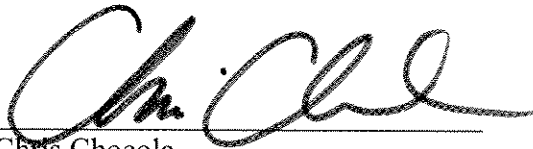
Given the continued closed enrollment at the South Bend CBOC, the need for another outpatient clinic becomes even more vital. VISN 11 recognizes the need for expanded services, as it included Elkhart on the list of highest priority CBOC sites for implementation in FY2007. While that request is being vetted by the central Veterans Affairs (VA) office, we ask for your assistance in working to open enrollment at the

South Bend CBOC. Such action will help alleviate the situation as the Elkhart County CBOC is considered.

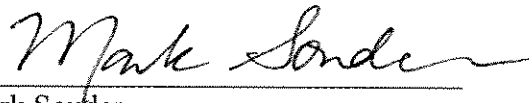
With roughly 600 veterans on the wait list at the South Bend CBOC, our highest priority veterans must take precedence. While the South Bend CBOC has taken great steps in increasing the level of health care to local veterans, they lack the authority to serve more veterans because enrollment remains closed. With the authority to open enrollment, the highest priority veterans would have the chance to receive care at the clinic. It would be a crucial step forward in providing the care veterans in Northern Indiana so richly deserve.

We stand ready to assist you with both the short- and long-term goals of expanding health care options for veterans in Northern Indiana. While work continues to create a CBOC in Elkhart County, we hope enrollment will be opened to assuage the immediate needs of the high priority veterans. Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,



Chris Chocola
Member of Congress



Mark Soudter
Member of Congress